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‘Stumbling through’? Relationship-based social work practice in austere times

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Abstract:

In recent times relationship-based practice has become a familiar term in social work practice and education. Despite its widespread adoption, how relationship-based practice is understood varies widely. Drawing on contemporary conceptualisations of the child and family and individuals as psychosocial subjects experiencing social suffering, this paper explores how current social work practice can be understood in the context of neoliberalism and austerity. Setting these ideas in an historical context helps to inform our understanding as to why social work seems to be the focus of sustained political discontent and scrutiny, making it difficult to retain a balanced relationship-based professional stance.

Contemporary responses to the current challenges of everyday practice are outlined and the contribution of psychodynamic and systemic ideas to promoting relationship-based practice is explored. The paper concludes by considering how the concept of social systems as defences against anxiety can inform our understanding of the resistance amongst practitioners to relationship-based practice and emphasises the importance of reflective spaces and places for developing and maintaining integrated, mature relational approaches to practice which both impact on practice at the individual casework and social structural level.

Keywords: relationship-based practice, psychosocial, systemic, anxiety, austerity

Introduction:

The first author of this paper recently carried out interviews with child and family social workers, as part of a small research project on special guardianship in an English city. The focus was to learn about social workers’ experiences of engaging parents who are facing removal of children from their care following incidents of abuse and neglect, and the subsequent attempts to locate special guardians within family networks for those children. What is striking, in one seasoned professional’s account, is the way in which she is able to describe the delicacy with which she negotiates her work with the parents and agency systems. Acknowledging the parents’ shame and embarrassment at finding themselves embroiled in the child protection system and their unwillingness to co-operate with professionals, the social worker describes with great sensitivity how she attempts to maintain working relationships with parents to ensure that the child is protected, yet enabled to remain living within her family network for the long-term.

While the social worker concerned described herself ‘stumbling through’ this piece of work, this paper takes the view that something very much more sophisticated in fact is taking

place here, akin to a form of practice described as 'safe uncertainty' by Featherstone et al rather than 'uncertain safety' (2014, p5). It is also a form of practice that is relationship-based adopting a stance that allows and encourages social work practitioners to 'look beneath the surface' in order to understand - to feel - the affective, irrational and unconscious aspects of practice and simultaneously 'to think outside the box' utilising the systemic ideas of curiosity, hypotheses and multiple narratives. Relationship-based practice, when approached psycho-dynamically and systemically, acknowledges the central role played by anxiety in all human relationships. As a primitive emotional state how individuals respond to and manage their anxiety is a significant factor in how relationships, especially in times of vulnerability and (dis)stress, are established and experienced. Whilst professionally challenging this relationship-based approach can become a rich source of insight. Importantly, this insight is not only into the complex lives of individual and families but also the demanding, at times demoralising and often unrelational, work contexts in which contemporary social work education and practice are located.

It is only relatively recently that this term 'relationship-based practice' has taken hold across the social work education and practice sector. Quite how it is understood theoretically and is applied in practice, however, varies widely. As authors of this paper and co-editors of this special issue our commitment to relationship-based practice is aligned with psychodynamic and systemic understandings of practice (Ruch, 2010). Unconventionally, rather than positioning these two theoretical perspectives as incompatible we emphasise their compatible and complementary characteristics (see the Special Issue: Dialogues and Developments in Social Work Practice: Applying Systemic and Psychoanalytic Ideas in Real World Contexts, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, Volume 21, Issue 2, July 2007 for paper supporting these ideas). We seek to explore the professional qualities and contexts necessary to carry out sensitive relationship-based social work which engages psychosocially with children, adults, families and communities in need of support or in risky situations during the current times of austerity; times which we argue present particular challenges for service users and professionals.

Relationships, risk, anxiety and austerity

Over the past three decades our ordinary experiences of anxiety have been exacerbated by an awareness of the prevalence of and preoccupation with risk in our everyday lives. During this time period the negative and constraining impact of the combination of anxiety and risk on our social and political landscape and our daily personal and professional lives has become increasingly visible and acknowledged (Giddens, 1991). More recently, the effects of this toxic anxiety-risk combination have been exacerbated with the Conservative government's ideological adoption of austerity as their chosen solution for the economic difficulties they have encountered. Rising to the challenge of working in relationship-based ways has become, therefore, an even bigger task in light of the repercussions associated

with the conflation of a risk pre-occupied society and an ideologically driven agenda of financial austerity.

Numerous social work academics and commentators (Broadhurst et al, 2010; Cooper, 2010; Wastell, 2010) have identified how the impact of a financially austere socio-political context on professional practices is manifested in heightened demands for financial accountability and a visible expansion of new public management practices – harsher performance indicators, tighter budget targets and increased audit activity. With this concentration on outcome-driven performance the extent to which professional practices and values determine practice has become increasingly constrained. On a day-to-day basis these trends are evidenced in practitioners finding themselves undertaking a disproportionate amount of office-based, computer-focussed work at the expense of face-to-face professional encounters families (Pithouse et al, 2012). In a financially austere climate professionally-informed practice shrinks in response to what might be referred to as ‘relational austerity’ - practice that is increasingly authoritarian rather than authoritative and combative rather than compassionate - emerges as an unintended consequence of this ideological manoeuvre.

Vignette: Austere professional practice

At a conference exploring inter-professional practice a social worker described a recent incident in their team involving a social worker covering for a colleague on annual leave. The covering social worker was required to undertake a routine statutory visit to a family where there were child protection concerns with a police officer. The social worker did not know the family but the children were in school and there were no new concerns. On arrival at the house there was no one in. The social worker tried to get hold of their manager unsuccessfully. The police officer got hold of the duty sergeant who instructed that they knock the door down, which subsequently happened.

Despite there being no new grounds to be concerned about the children in this family a disproportionately risk averse act took place that undoubtedly will have seriously damaged, if not destroyed, the relationship that the allocated social worker had with this family. Although an extreme example, less dramatic, but no less serious, versions of overly authoritarian and risk averse practices are permeating professional practice on a daily basis. How can we understand and overcome this anti-relational, anxiety-ridden state of affairs? Before attempting to answer this question it is necessary to understand and explore how the prevailing societal conditions impact on those children and families who are the recipients of social work interventions and struggling on account of welfare cuts and a punitive political environment.

The socio-political landscape, service users and welfare provision

There are several accounts in the social work literature of the challenging times facing children, adults, families and communities who are in need of welfare support in contemporary society, due to illness, abuse or other vulnerabilities (Wilson et al 2011; Parton 2014, Featherstone et al 2014; Morris et al 2015). Drawing on Wilson et al's (2011) summary to set the scene from a sociological perspective, based on Giddens' (1991) analysis, the certainty of 'modernity' with its belief in institutions, truth, grand theory and knowledge as absolute has given way to 'late modernity'. In conditions of late modernity, uncertainty holds sway and acceptance of the existence of multiple realities and truths create an environment experienced as inherently risky. To deal with this, bureaucratic systems predominate, managerialism becomes the norm and social work practice becomes depersonalised and defensive in nature. Market principles are also brought into play, with clients becoming 'service users' and 'rational consumers' rather than people with difficulties who would prefer to have a professional to talk and relate to (Wilson et al, 2011, p7).

Alongside the emergence of late modernity, a neo-liberal political environment ushered in by Thatcher and nursed by New Labour has been given a new lease of life by the current Conservative government in England, leading to what Parton (2015, p139) describes as an 'authoritarian neoliberal state'. For Parton (2015, p140), practices of new public management have increased rates of contracting out services from local government and 'payment by results', to bring about 'a much greater emphasis on a coercive paternalism that strives to strengthen labour discipline and social behaviour, particularly among the underclass'. The market is brought to bear on welfare systems. Paradoxically, while business is given greater autonomy from state control, recipients of welfare become subject to 'coercive paternalism', disciplined and supervised to a greater degree by a 'muscular state' (Parton 2015, p140).

Featherstone et al (2014) and Morris et al (2015) look further at this theme, by considering how the hostile socio-political environment impacts on vulnerable families. Morris et al (2015) point out how the current government attempts to pit 'worthy' working families against those who are seen to be floundering. With the impact of social exclusion set aside, in terms of its role as a welfare policy driver during New Labour times, struggling families are seen as 'wilfully failing to exercise good judgement to take up opportunities to become hard working families, or are argued to be making poor choices', for example, to live in violent relationships' (Morris et al, 2015, p 2). So this construction sees parents in such families as 'liberal subjects' (Frost and Hoggett, 2015, p439) who could change if they wished to (they are seen as having agency); the fact that they have not changed then legitimates the ruling government's view that certain controlling and disciplining social policies should be put in place. Morris et al (2015) go on to look at how social workers can be caught-up in this punishing attitude, seen to be accepting such constructions of 'family' and not always ethically or with a full view of the social factors actually impacting on them. This kind of 'relational austerity' sees children as having to be 'rescued' from such families;

preventative practices dwindle and risk averse interventions result in removal of children, increasingly into permanent adoptive placements, against the wishes of parents.

Featherstone et al (2014, p15) suggest that social workers should take a stand against this kind of approach, choosing instead to make their practice humanistic and relational, introducing the notion of 'felt thoughtfulness'. So in order to engage in social work with vulnerable families, feelings matter and there is a need to empathise. Their preference is to make a link with strengths perspectives:

'The focus on capabilities...is crucial-professionals are not there to intervene and solve problems- they are there to listen, challenge and support a process of discovery and transformation. Relationships are of course key: within and between families; between families and the team; with neighbours and wider communities' (Featherstone et al, 2014, p35).

Their wish is for social workers to practise in a way which fully acknowledges the impact of poverty and structural disadvantage on vulnerable families, as well as the need to reflect on how powerful professionals can seem to families facing child protection systems.

Manualised, evidence based approaches to assessment should not be employed without professionals truly taking-in how disempowering professional intervention can be.

Featherstone et al (2014) suggest that the resistance towards professional intervention put up by families should be viewed in this light.

The psychosocial subject and social suffering

Another perspective, which takes this a step further, is that presented by Frost and Hoggett (2015) who draw on the notion of the 'psychosocial subject' and the concept of 'social suffering'. This analysis makes it possible to critique the notion of a 'liberal welfare subject', who *should* be rational and have agency (but who when subject to the disciplining state is viewed instead as workshy and dependent) replacing this instead with the idea of a 'post-liberal subject'. In this view, which draws from feminism and psychoanalysis, relatedness and embodiment is emphasised:

"the psychosocial subject" is being theorized psychoanalytically as possessing an unconscious dimension of subjectivity. Equally importantly the subject here is a social subject in a world of power relations and status hierarchies: a social subject with agency, though not necessarily in a position to exercise this reflexively (Frost and Hoggett, 2015, 440).

Moving away then from a sense of the rational 'liberal subject', Frost and Hoggett (2015, p 440) suggest that a life led subject to poverty and social disadvantage, resulting in state intervention and control, can be one of 'social suffering', encompassing 'the lived experience of the social damage inflicted in late capitalist societies on the least powerful and the intra-psychic and relational wounds that result'. In their account, the link is made

between mental and physical health and poverty and social disadvantages of all forms, emphasising the way in which the hurt is internalised and individualised, the experience of shame further isolating individuals. Drawing on Butler's (1997) work, they consider how the lack of public recognition of loss and damage can result in 'foreclosure'; a lack of opportunity to symbolise and to process experiences, adding a melancholic dimension to suffering. Somatising and embodiment of this suffering or else acting out in antisocial harmful behaviour towards others, often those closest, can result, leading to what Frost and Hoggett (2015, p 449) describe as 'double suffering'.

Importantly, their analysis points out that people who experience social suffering may not want to be helped by well-meaning professionals, including social workers. Instead, they may present 'as aggressive, resentful or suspicious people whose hurt and loss is directed at others rather than at themselves' (ibid, p 453). This harks back to Featherstone et al (2014) and Morris et al (2015) who point out that such responses may be understood in terms of the resistance service users may show to professionals, who ostensibly are 'trying to help'. It may be worth reflecting further here on the unconscious processes which draw professionals towards their vocation. People who are drawn towards social work, for example, are often thought to have a need to make reparation, their unconscious need to be accepted by service users potentially clashing painfully with experience when shouted at by an angry, and most definitely ungrateful, service user.

The social work profession under scrutiny

It was suggested earlier that the social work profession has been subjected to a great deal of scrutiny and interference from politicians and that this seems to have been ongoing for some while. At the time of writing, the *Children and Social Work Bill* (House of Lords 2016) has recently been published, which includes a proposal that government should take over regulation of the profession from the independent, member subscription-funded HCPC and that professional misconduct may result in a new range of criminal offences. This would seem to reveal the extent to which the profession appears to be mistrusted; itself requiring of state control rather akin to the service users it seeks to work alongside as described above. While political challenge is not new, the direct intervention of government ministers in the profession seems to have reached greater heights as, for example, social work education seems to be becoming 'academized' by the introduction of semi-privatised alternative training programmes. Rather like the establishment of free schools in the education world in England, new generously funded forms of social work trainings are being introduced while traditional university based programmes face continuing uncertainty about their future and dwindling financial support.

Parton (2000) helps to account for social work's politicized positioning as he sets out how it sits in the space he describes as 'the social' between the individual and the state. From within this space, social workers attempt to mediate between service users in need of support and the state, advocating for services along with managing risk and resources in an

uneasy alliance. This is essentially relational work as social workers attempt to get alongside service users to assist in finding solutions to problems in living. The profession relies however on there being a 'listening' State, interested in going part-way towards finding compromises to help those who (through experiences of abuse, trauma, illness and other forms of disadvantage) do not necessarily find it easy to conform to prevailing socio-political norms. Current political interference therefore hampers the profession's potential to do important relational work, by 'attacking the link' to borrow from Bion (1959). The state's relationship with, and sense of responsibility towards, those in some categories of need is shut-off. Relationship-based social work seems suddenly contentious; as Cooper (2010:243) warned several years ago 'the threat to relationship-based social work is a political matter'. Instead of complying with or blaming 'the system', however, he proposes we should be 'entering an active engagement with it' (ibid: 242), which is what this paper is aiming to do.

Relationship-based practice in an historical context

An historical view may help our understanding of why social work seems to be the focus of politicians' discontent, by showing that this is by no means a new phenomenon. Historically, the social work profession (and its predecessors in the early charitable sector) occupies a contentious position, with debates about values, aims and purpose. Howe (2009) sets out many of the theoretical, political and professional developments in all their complexity and richness. Of relevance to our times, in particular, are the debates he describes around the setting up of social work's predecessor, the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in 1869; where the role of the caseworker first emerged. As Wilson et al (2011) elaborate the COS provided a moral dimension to charitable giving, as they designed a 'scientific' casework approach, targeting support towards those who might be helped out of poverty into productive work. Those seen as having 'brought it on themselves' were excluded and left to 'the cold embrace of the Poor Law' (Howe, 2009, p15). This echoes then with our contemporary socio-political environment, with government attempts to discipline and manage those in need of welfare support. Importantly however, the COS-devised casework method (home visit, interview, investigation and so on) comprised an individualised approach which continues to this day in UK social work, typified by psychological interventions (psychoanalytic, behaviourist, CBT, MI for example). In contrast to this, others emphasised societal causes for people's problems in living; for example, via the Settlement Movement and the work of Barnett (Wilson et al, 2011). The need for community and society level interventions which see lack of education as a cause of poverty and deprivation are favoured. Thus, the question about whether social work as a profession should occupy the radical, social reforming tendency or retain an individualised casework approach comes to the fore, played out again in our times in the context of austerity and a Right-leaning government.

To draw on Cooper (2010) and Trevithick (2011) the point surely for psychosocially informed social workers is that relationship-based practice should do its best to draw on both

perspectives; both to raise broader social awareness of the everyday struggles facing disadvantaged sectors of the community, while engaging in supportive casework and in managing risk. Social workers such as the one described at the beginning of this paper, who ‘stumble’ through their interventions are in fact doing the complicated job of relating one to one with family members (via individualised ‘casework’), while mediating contact with other parts of the system who have to be drawn in (the courts, the social work agency with its management structures, schools and so on). The latter often involves very direct advocacy and canvassing in order to ensure individuals and families gain access to scarce resources and services and should ideally feed-upwards so that councillors and elected members are kept informed about social issues facing members of the community they serve.

Obstacles to and opportunities for relationship-based practice in the context of austerity

This brings us back to the question posed earlier: how can we overcome the prevailing anti-relationship-based, anxiety-ridden state of affairs that social workers encounter on a daily basis? It also leads to a second question: how can a systemic, ‘both-and’, position that recognises the societal and the individual components characterising all social work encounters be adopted and sustained? When endeavouring to conceptualise this current state of affairs that social work practitioners and managers are encountering, the second author has found that representing it to practitioners in terms of the polarities of everyday practice, as outlined below, appears to resonate with their everyday experiences.

Characteristics of Professionally Austere Practice

ASSUMPTIONS Certain Simple Risk-free and averse	ASSUMPTIONS Uncertain Complex Risk-ridden and tolerant
BEHAVIOURS Doing Cognitive/Rational Objective Outcome-driven Techno-bureaucracy	BEHAVIOURS Being Affective/Irrational Subjective Relationship-based Emotional intelligence

What the table above seeks to illustrate is how the practices and behaviours in each of the columns are derived from the first three fundamental assumptions about contemporary social work. In the left hand column are the assumptions that government and employers expect practitioners to ‘work to’ i.e. to take ‘as read’ that the world is a certain, simple and potentially risk free place. The expectation is that this mindset will inform all their

relationships with service users. Adopting this position then results in the subsequent list of behaviours that privilege rational responses and task-dominated, outcome-driven, 'doing' practices, that ultimately configures social workers as techno-bureaucrats. Overtones of Parton's (2015) liberal subject can no doubt be heard. Conversely the right hand column represents how practitioners *actually* experience their everyday working lives. It is fundamentally uncertain, complex and risk-ridden, with no two individuals or families being the same, with each professional encounter being unique (Ruch, 2010). From this position social workers have to be in touch with subjective, affective and relational knowledge, able to 'be' with service users, drawing on their emotional intelligence.

Vignette: encouraging relationship-based supervision

In the context of a reflective work discussion workshop with practitioners that was thinking about the role of supervision in everyday practice a member of the group described how in a previous job she had had supervision that went on for four hours. There was an audible gasp of incredulity from the group when she said this and she too acknowledged that it had felt excessive. In contrast she described how now when she went into a supervision session her supervisor sat with a clipboard, would look up and start the session with the question 'Wellbeing?', to which it was clear to her that the expected answer was simply 'yes' or 'no'.

This true vignette highlights how a position that is informed by only one or other professional practice perspective (i.e. one or other set of assumptions and behaviours) is compromised. Whilst the tickbox, terse 'wellbeing?' approach might appear to be the less desirable supervision model, the therapeutically orientated, four hour supervision model is equally undesirable and ineffective if rational organisational systems, structures and procedures to guide action-oriented practice do not exist. The challenge this polarised representation of professional social work practice generates is that neither position has a monopoly on what constitutes best practice. Much as the historical account of the profession illustrates how the psychological/individual and the sociological/structural dimensions of social work have needed to be held in a creative tension over time, the same can be said for the characteristics of professional practice, as outlined here. To create a best practice relationship-based model requires an integrated professional perspective that overcomes the pull towards polarised positions, a model which embraces behaviours from both perspectives. To benefit from the strengths of either perspective, an integrated position needs to be found. In keeping with Winnicottian and Kleinian ideas of 'good enough' approaches (Winnicott, 1960) and the depressive position (Bower, 2005), plus systemic ideas that emphasise 'both-and' perspectives (Hedges, 2005), the challenge is for practitioners to hold these professional binaries in a creative tension with each other. How might this be achieved?

In her seminal paper exploring a psychoanalytic understanding of the experiences, prior to the death, of Victoria Climbié, Margaret Rustin (2005:12) describes what in her view gets in the way of professionals responding to, 'seeing', trauma:

What is it, at root, that is being avoided?... Of particular relevance are frequent examples [in the Laming inquiry report] of "turning a blind eye" – that is failing to see what is before one's eyes because to do so would cause too much psychic disturbance – and of various forms of "attacks on linking" – that is systematic disconnection between things which logically belong together, again a defence which is employed because to make the link would be a source of painful anxiety.

This austere, anxious avoidance, that Rustin so vividly captures, underpins, we suggest, much contemporary practice, as practitioners struggle, without the necessary reflective spaces, to fully absorb and respond to what they are required to take in. This psychologically informed idea of 'turning a blind eye', such a powerful image, makes sense of how and why practitioners can become, both unwillingly, and in some instances unwittingly, office bound bureau- technocrats. It offers an alternative explanation for the 80% office -20% face-to-face work split that is invariably attributed to the demands of New Public Management. Indeed it might explain why the demands of New Public Management go largely unchallenged. New Public Management and austere anxiety go 'hand in glove'. Unless the anxiety underpinning practice is identified and owned, what is seen, but simultaneously not seen, will only increase. Understood in this way it is possible to conceptualise the acceptance of New Public Management practices in social work practice as a contemporary representation of a social defence against anxiety (Menzies-Lyth, 1988).

Recent publications which develop and adapt Menzies-Lyth's (1988) theoretical framework of social systems as defences against anxiety offer a fruitful way for thinking about the challenges involved in maintaining a balanced relational professional mindset (Armstrong and Rustin 2015, Lees, Meyer and Rafferty, 2013; Cooper and Lees, 2015; Whittaker, 2011). In his paper based on empirical research conducted in frontline child care social work teams in the wake of the Munro Review into Child Protection, Andrew Whittaker heeds caution in relation to how the bureaucratic stranglehold on the profession is addressed. As with all defensive structures, individual or organisational, they exist for a reason and dismantling them requires great care. Cooper and Lees (2015, p. 255) recognise the significance of this sensitive but necessary action, acknowledging how whether function or dysfunctional the purpose of defences is '*to successfully disguise or obscure the threats, feeling states or fantasies to which they are than attempted solution.*'

In keeping with the professional model outlined above a healthy and mature professional mindset and context that resists being split and austere requires a balanced integration of bureaucratically-driven and relationally-driven practices. Critical to this mindset is the importance of facing up to the reality of anxiety, rather than avoiding it, as social defences seek to do. Whittaker (2011 p. 493) concludes with an acknowledgment of risk as an

‘inescapable reality given the complexity that is inherent within the work’ and cites Munro’s (2011) call for a ‘risk sensible’ rather than a ‘risk averse’ culture which will require *‘a greater emphasis on the emotional aspects of organizational culture in order to enable anxiety to be acknowledged and worked through.’*

Developing reflective and relationship-based spaces and places

Physiologically it is accepted that the ingestion of materials involves the digestion of nutritious materials and the evacuation of those that are toxic. The *psychological* digestive process is in many ways no different. The nourishing elements of relationships with others need digesting - introjecting - in order for positive and sustaining relationships to develop, whilst the toxic aspects of relationships, so common in social work practice, require an appropriate evacuation process to prevent it damaging professional effectiveness, growth and well-being. In Bion’s (1962) terms we are referring to the quality of the container-contained relationship and the extent to which through supportive professional relationships, such as supervision, the unbearable emotional responses to anxiety-provoking everyday experiences can be digested and tolerated. And the use of the word ‘everyday’ is critical to our argument. We are not simply talking about exceptional, extraordinary incidents when vulnerable children and adults tragically die or are seriously injured at the hands of others or their own hands. Rather we are talking about the daily, ordinary encounters social workers have with individuals and families, children and adults who are struggling with emotionally and socially austere, anxiety provoking circumstances.

Over the past three decades the place of psychoanalytically-informed work discussion groups has become established as a source of support for professionals working with people in a range of settings – schools, residential care homes, health care, prisons, the community (Rustin and Bradley, xxx). The purpose of the work discussion group is to afford a space where practitioners can safely share a work encounter with other professionals who pay careful attention to what is evoked in them by the case material. The model requires the practitioner presenting the work for discussion to read their written account of the encounter to the group and the discussion begins by the group facilitator asking the group what their first impressions are of what has been read out. Rustin and Bradley’s (2008) edited book on work discussion provides a rich variety of vivid accounts of the power and potential of this reflective approach. In the context of this paper with its historical and contemporary overview of the serious and sustained challenges faced by social workers, work discussion groups can provide a crucial ‘secure base’ and ‘safe haven’, to use attachment terminology (Youell, 2016, First International Conference on Work Discussion), from which social workers can venture and to which they can return.

As has been highlighted above a distinctive and potentially dangerous and destructive feature of contemporary social work practice is the tendency for aspects of the professional social work role to become split apart and polarised. Hence practitioners find themselves functioning *either* (and currently predominantly) as techno-bureaucrats with negligible

contact with the children and families they are involved with *or* as relationship-based practitioners who are at risk of not having a clear enough purpose and action focus. This polarised, paranoid-schizoid, either-or position, to use psychoanalytic and systemic terminology, is neither functional or effective. In the space afforded by work discussion groups, however, important opportunities are created for a more integrated, depressive professional state of mind to emerge. By this we mean the ability to hold in a creative tension the significance of the affective and reflective dimensions of relational encounters with the action-orientated dimensions derived from clear, purposeful professional structures and procedures. These integrated experiences are captured by Western (2010) in a model of containment that combines what he refers to as the paternal qualities of authority-structure-boundaries, which allow for the expression of the maternal qualities of reverie-caring-holding-attention, in turn leading to action and the retention of a crucial connection to external reality. Whilst the gendered characteristics of this model might be critiqued, it does recognise and reinforce the importance of an integrated 'doing and being' approach to practice.

In an earlier paper one of the authors (Ruch, 2007) has outlined an holistic model for supervision that encompasses three types of containment- emotional (being), epistemological (knowing) and organisational (doing). The intention and impact of this model on practice maps onto the intentions and impact of work discussion groups. These synergies suggest there is no one way of attending to the needs of practitioners generated by relationship-based practice. Rather there are potentially multiple configurations of such support systems but what is essential for them to be fit for purpose and effective is for their focus to be equally attached to the being, doing and knowing aspects of practice. As it currently stands the 'doing' dimension is disproportionately large, tending to take over from time spent thinking and informing practice. And it almost suffocates the possibility for 'being' in practice, the capacity to reflect and to feel one's way into and through professional encounters. One way of visually conveying what an integrated, depressive or a 'both-and' mindset, might look like, involves moving one's hands from a polarised position of separate hands held out at shoulder width to a clasped hands position, with fingers interwoven with each other.

Vignette: Being, knowing and doing in professional practice

As part of the assessment requirements of a Continuing Professional Development module entitled Observing, Communicating and Engaging with Children and Young People practitioners were required to complete a self-evaluation report across the three domains of knowing doing and being (Lefevre, 2010). Reading a set of assignments produced from the module it was striking how practitioners repeatedly acknowledged in their reflective self-evaluations that learning to 'be' with children was one the most important pieces of learning to come out of the module. In particular practitioners acknowledged the value of undertaking an observation task

where they really 'saw' children for the first time and experienced the challenge of simply being alongside the child with no requirement to do anything other than observe. The insights gained contributed to enhanced experiential understanding of the emotional, internal worlds of children.

These evaluative comments reinforce that ways of being cannot be learnt cognitively but emerge out of experience. The importance of practitioners having space to attend to sustaining a balanced professional identity needs to be accompanied by experiences of professional relationships with colleagues who can model such integrated and holistic approaches to practice. Practitioners, therefore, depend on managers, supervisors and educators who can model such ways of being in their own practice, reinforcing the vital importance of reflective spaces being available to and utilised by everyone regardless of professional rank or role (Ruch, 2012). These professionals' reflective spaces are important for service users too, so that the impact of 'social suffering' experienced during times of relational austerity can be understood and considered by managers as well as those on the frontline; integrated into interventions so that blame is less easily assigned. Social workers need to be able to operate and to manoeuvre in this space between the state and individual services users, both with rationality and feeling, to try to bring about solutions to complex, often risky lived experiences.

Where do we go from here?

Referring back to the practitioner in our opening paragraph, her description of 'stumbling through' provides an apt description of practice. It implies firstly, movement that seeks to respond to the sensitivities and unpredictability of people's lives, resisting a static, fixed mindset. Secondly, it acknowledges the frailty of our interventions and our need for professional confidence, authority and humility, and in so doing it avoids the seductive overtures of the de-personalised, evidence based directives that currently hold sway.

Life begins in relationships and our personal identities develop from a relational context. As Winnicott so aptly said '*There is no such thing as an infant... without maternal care one would find no infant*' (Winnicott, 1960, p. 39). Being able to hold in mind both a good and bad object is one of the earliest developmental relational tasks infants have to negotiate and it continues to be the work of adults too. One of the most challenging but important features of psychodynamic and systemic approaches, we would suggest, is the ability to remain in a dynamic and integrated position that resists our intuitive propensity to split our experiences and to adopt a default polarised position. In the increasingly unequal social context that is currently being configured by the politics of austerity, social workers face the daily challenge of retaining a depressive state of mind that is able to offer hope in difficult circumstances. Long may we stumble along our relationship-based way.

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